



**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes Critical Habitat for Seven Freshwater Mussels**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today a proposal to designate approximately 1,200 miles of river and stream channel in the Southeast as critical habitat for seven species of freshwater mussels protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The proposed designations for these mussels encompass portions of river and stream channels in four northeast Gulf of Mexico drainages: the Econfinia Creek drainage in Florida, the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River drainage in Alabama, Florida and Georgia, the Ochlockonee River drainage in Florida and Georgia, and the Suwannee River drainage in Florida.

The seven mussels are the endangered fat threeridge, shinyrayed pocketbook, Gulf moccasinshell, Ochlockonee moccasinshell, as well as oval pigtoe, and the threatened Chipola slabshell and purple bankclimber.

Public comments on the proposed rule will be accepted until August 4, 2006. Written comments on the proposal should be submitted to the Panama City Field Office, addressed to Jerry Ziewitz, at the above address. Written comments can be delivered to the Panama City Field Office, 1601 Balboa Ave., Panama City, FL 32405 attention Jerry Ziewitz. Comments may also be faxed to 850/763-2177, or sent by electronic mail (e-mail) to [\*\*FW4ESFRPanamaCity@FWS.gov\*\*](mailto:FW4ESFRPanamaCity@FWS.gov).

As listed species under the ESA, the seven mussels are already protected wherever they occur, and Federal agencies are required to consult on any action they take that might affect the species.

Critical habitat is a term in the ESA. It refers to specific geographic areas that have features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that may require special management and protection. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve or other conservation area. Critical habitat does not impose restrictions on lands unless Federal funds, permits, or activities are involved. Critical habitat does not include existing developed sites within the proposed units such as roads, driveways, or buildings.

When determining areas to designate as critical habitat, the Service considers physical and biological habitat features that are essential to the conservation of the species. These features for the seven mussels include stable stream channels; sand, gravel or cobble stream bottom, flowing water, water quality, and the availability of fish hosts. The areas proposed as critical habitat are currently occupied by one or more of the seven mussels. The Service chose not to designate any unoccupied areas at this time.

As part of designating critical habitat, the Service also takes into account the economic impact, as well as any other relevant impacts, of specifying any particular area as critical habitat. The Service may exclude any area from critical habitat if it is determined that the benefits of excluding it outweigh the benefits of specifying the area as a part of critical habitat, unless such exclusion will result in the extinction of the species.

The service is preparing a draft economic analysis of the proposed critical habitat that will be released for public review and comment at a later date. Public hearings on this proposal will be scheduled after the draft economic analysis becomes available.

The proposed critical habitat designation rule was prepared pursuant to a court order resulting from a lawsuit filed against the Service by the Center for Biological Diversity.

In 30 years of implementing the ESA, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the ESA including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for endangered species is provided on many National Wildlife Refuges and state wildlife management areas.

A complete description of the proposed critical habitat designation has been published in the *Federal Register* today. The proposal and maps can be found on our website at <http://www.fws.gov/panamacity/>. Copies of the proposal and maps are available by contacting Jerry Ziewitz, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1601 Balboa Avenue, Panama City, Florida 32405, telephone 850/769-0552, extension 223; facsimile 850/763-2177.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices, and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the

Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies. Visit the Service's website at [\*\*http://www.fws.gov\*\*](http://www.fws.gov).

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